



Report to Cabinet

Date:	7 th May 2024
Title:	Cost of Living Support for Buckinghamshire Residents
Cabinet Member(s):	Arif Hussain – Cabinet Member for Communities
Contact officer:	Matt Everitt – Service Director, Business Intelligence and Community Support
Ward(s) affected:	None specific
Recommendations:	To note the range of support provided by the Council for individuals experiencing hardship across the county. To approve the arrangements for deploying the new Household Support Fund allocation from the Department for Work and Pensions.
Reason for recommendation:	The Government confirmed allocations for the Household Support Fund on 26 th March 2024. This report sets out proposals for use of the funding to provide support for Buckinghamshire residents between April and September 2024 in line with Government guidance.

This item was taken under the General Exception rule as the grant received was for use between April and September 2024 and therefore time critical.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 As a Council, we recognise the ongoing challenges our residents are experiencing due

to cost of living pressures. To help mitigate this and provide support to residents, we have continued to develop and deliver a range of initiatives to support residents; and have continued to provide support to residents who are most in need through our Helping Hand service.

- 1.2 We are pleased to receive confirmation of the fifth tranche of Household Support Fund grant from the Department for Work and Pensions. This new allocation will cover the period from April to September 2024, and will be used to continue to provide essential support to residents across Buckinghamshire.
- 1.3 This new allocation builds on the funding we have received from Government since 2020, initially through the Winter Grant and Local Support Grant, and subsequently through the Household Support Fund.
- 1.4 Previous allocations of the Household Support Fund have been used to provide support for residents in need of help with food, fuel and other essential household costs. For the period April 2023 to March 2024, Buckinghamshire was allocated £4.8m of the Household Support Fund.
- 1.5 This paper outlines the support we have provided, and continue to provide, to support residents with cost-of-living pressures. This paper also details how the previous Household Support Fund allocation was used and sets out a proposed use of the new allocation between 1st April to 30th September 2024, ensuring that this is targeted to residents in need of support and in line with the Government guidance.
- 1.6 Further information about usage of previous Household Support Fund allocations can be viewed in previous reports:

<https://buckinghamshire.moderngov.co.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Id=36173&PlanId=269&RPID=0>





**helping
hand**

Helping Hand 2023/2024

Applications and support provided
1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024



9,851
Total applications



12,104
Total provisions



4,186
Individuals
receiving provisions

Provisions

1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

12,104

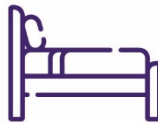
Total provisions



1,566
Referrals



1,394
White goods



677
Essential goods



7,802
Food and fuel



655
Grants

Community Support – School Holiday Vouchers: 2023/2024

School Holidays



May Half-Term
14,843



Feb Half-Term
14,795



Summer Holiday
14,538



Easter Holiday
14,929



October Half-Term
14,163



Christmas Holiday
14,624

Total Vouchers Delivered
87,892

2. Cost of Living Initiatives

2.1 Buckinghamshire Council has continued to work closely with organisations and partners across the county, particularly with the voluntary and community sector, to reduce gaps in provision and ensure there is a comprehensive offer for residents who are most in need.

2.2 Key initiatives have included:

2.2.1 Developing our communications strategy to ensure that residents who need support are aware of what is available and how to access this. The Buckinghamshire Council website includes a detailed 'Cost of Living' section which is regularly updated with new information, frequent posts are made on social media platforms to reach residents and a printed Resident Support Leaflet has been distributed across the County (predominantly focusing on Opportunity Bucks wards) to reach residents who may not be accessing content online.

2.2.2 Continuing to develop and support 'Welcoming Spaces' where people can come together in a warm, safe and supportive environment across the County, primarily in our Libraries and also through 17 additional community venues for residents to access. We've also distributed 640 warm packs during the winter of 2023/24, through Welcoming Spaces and through key partners across the county who helped to ensure that residents who needed these most were able to receive them.

2.2.3 Our Food Champions Network, which is made up of residents who take the lead on coordinating food collections for their local area and ensuring these are received by local food banks, has expanded and there are currently 47 food champions across the county.

2.2.4 Launching our Energy Doctor scheme, providing support to eligible households to reduce fuel costs and increase energy efficiency through the implementation of energy saving measures such as insulation jackets for hot water cylinders, energy saving lightbulbs and draft proofing. Over 400 properties were visited by the Energy Doctor team in 2023/24.

2.2.5 Our Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) team has been working with a small cohort of residents from Opportunity Bucks wards who have contacted Helping Hand for support a high number of times, helping to connect them with other services that can support and address underlying challenges.

2.3 Further information about the range of support available can be found on our website, which has been updated as a comprehensive source of information for people who need support with the cost of living:

<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living/>

2.4 In partnership with Red Kite Housing through our Opportunity Bucks programme, we have implemented a policy change to support tenants by leaving in place good condition carpets when tenants in Red Kite properties change over. Previously carpets were removed at this stage. This change was introduced in August 2023 following positive reception of this, additional Housing Associations are now also offering this to their tenants.

- 2.5 In partnership with Fairhive Housing, we continue to support the weekly Community Hub at the Vineyard in Aylesbury which is attended by Fairhive and by Buckinghamshire Council's Helping Hand service. This Hub offers a one-stop shop service that is free to access by any resident and provides support & advice on housing, employment, financial challenges, training and well-being.
- 2.6 The Buckinghamshire Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is funded by the Department for Education and provides free, high-quality holiday activity clubs with a healthy hot meal for children from low-income families. The programme runs in the longer school holiday periods (Easter, summer and Christmas) for children in Reception to Year 11 inclusive who receive benefits-related free school meals. The HAF programme will continue until March 2025.
- 2.6.1 Throughout 2023 the HAF programme enabled over 5,500 individual children and young people across the county to enjoy over 21,436 holiday activity club sessions and hot meals during the school holidays. The range of activities on offer throughout 2023 increased with the inclusion of 'added value' providers who offered one off activities such as mobile farms, roller discos and beatbox workshops. HAF also welcomed Bikeability sessions to HAF this year; allowing 280 children aged 4-7 to learn the basics for using a balance bike. This, alongside the inclusion of family events, take home activity packs and HAF activity booklets, strengthened the offer in Buckinghamshire. With over 6,500 holiday activity club sessions planned for Easter 2024, the number of children accessing HAF is expected to grow during the 24/25 financial year with additional organisations getting involved and offering an increasing number of holiday sessions.
- 2.6.2 The Council can also offer HAF holiday club places to certain groups of children and young people who are not in receipt of benefits-related free school meals, but who could benefit from HAF provision. This means that we will be able to reach and support more vulnerable children and young people in Buckinghamshire to have a more enjoyable holiday experience. Across 2023, over 400 individual children and young people in this category have benefited from HAF provision.
- 2.7 In addition to the support we are providing locally, the Government has also provided support including:
- 2.7.1 Cost of Living payments delivered by DWP were made in Spring 23 (£301), Autumn 23 (£300) and in Spring 2024 (£299).
- 2.7.2 This includes all households receiving: Universal Credit, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Pension credit.

Case Study 1

- Single, 59-year-old male with a disability reducing his ability to work.
- All white goods broken over previous years and no funds to replace them.
- Debts with gas/ electric suppliers.
- Struggling to complete the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) forms to receive additional benefits

Outcomes:

- White goods purchased and installed
- Heart of Bucks grant to clear gas and electric arrears
- Referral to Citizens Advice Bucks to support with PIP application and benefit maximisation

I cannot begin to thank you enough for your help with this. The last few years have been absolute hell for me, from a standpoint of health, ability to work, rising food and energy prices and low income. This is a huge weight being lifted from me, giving me breathing space once again

3. Household Support Fund 4 - April 2023 to March 2024

3.1 Funding allocated from the Department for Work and Pensions' Household Support Fund during this period totalled £4.8m.

3.2 In line with previous allocations of funding, this fund was intended to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.

3.3 Local Authorities had flexibility within the fund to identify which vulnerable households were in most need of support and apply discretion when identifying eligibility, ensuring that residents who were not receiving other means of Government support had access to this fund and using a wide range of data and sources of information to ensure support was provided to vulnerable households most in need.

3.4 Local Authorities were required to operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need had a route to crisis support throughout the duration of the fund.

3.5 Within the parameters set out in 3.2, the Household Support Fund could be used to cover:

3.5.1 Energy bills relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills.

3.5.2 Support with food costs either through vouchers or cash.

3.5.3 Other household essentials – this may include those linked to energy and water, for example sanitary products, boiler repair or servicing, warm clothing, purchase of fridge/freezers; or for wider essentials, for example broadband costs, phone costs, clothing, transport-related costs such as car repairs.

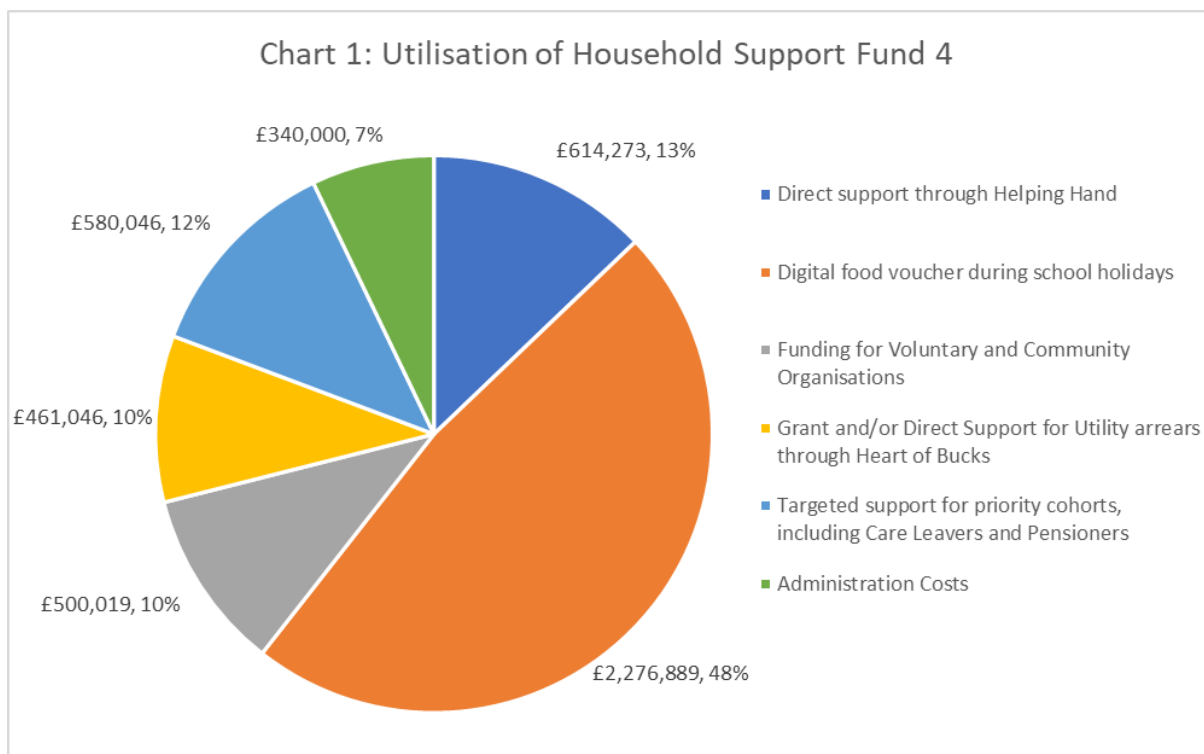
3.5.4 Housing costs could be covered in exceptional circumstances and where existing housing schemes did not meet this exceptional need. For example,

the fund could not be used to provide mortgage support but could be used to cover historic rent arrears that had built up prior to receipt of other benefits. The fund could not be used to cover mortgage costs.

3.5.5 The fund could also be used to cover reasonable administration costs, including staff costs, web page design, IT system costs and promotional activity and content to raise the profile of the scheme.

3.5.6 A change from previous funds was that this fund could be used to provide supplementary advice services to award recipients, including debt and benefit advice, where Local Authorities considered this appropriate and this complemented practical support being provided.

3.6 Use of this funding is detailed in Chart 1:



3.7 Between April 2023 and March 2024, this fund provided:

3.7.1 More than 87,892 digital food vouchers issued to, on average, 14,500 young people during all school holidays. Eligible young people are those in receipt of Free School Meals/Early Years' Pupil Premium/2-year-old funded free education places.

3.7.2 Funding has been provided to support over 95 Voluntary and Community Sector initiatives/schemes for residents across Buckinghamshire ranging from cookery courses to lunch clubs benefitting a total of 27,000 households including 12,800 households with children.

3.7.3 Funding for 15 emergency food support organisations including food banks across Buckinghamshire, who have supported approximately 10,291

households between April 2023 and March 2024.

- 3.7.4 Supermarket vouchers enabling over 480 Care Leavers to purchase food and household essentials.
- 3.7.5 Vouchers to 8,400 pensioners who were also receiving Council Tax Reduction, to help mitigate cost of living pressures.
- 3.7.6 Supported Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty (Wycombe and Chesham offices) with the costs of Debt Relief Orders for 11 residents experiencing significant financial challenges, and Bankruptcy costs for 3 residents.
- 3.7.7 Over £95,000 awarded to support 89 households, via a Heart of Bucks grant, with housing costs and arrears, without which these households would have been at serious risk of homelessness and may have required temporary accommodation.
- 3.7.8 The Helping Hand team directly delivered over £610,000 of support to residents through purchasing essential white goods and essentials to keep them warm including clothing and other essential items.

Case Study 2

- Single mum with two children (one with a registered disability)
- Survivor of Economic Abuse during her marriage (all bills were put into her name without her knowing)
- Works full-time
- Struggling emotionally after the divorce and unable to open any debt related letters
- Received a court summons for Council tax

Outcomes:

- Heart of Bucks grant of £2,000 awarded to clear the Council tax arrears
- Engagement with Women's Aid for counselling and support.

I want to express my gratitude to you and the Helping Hand team for your help with the grant towards my council tax bill. As well as the way I was treated with dignity and compassion when I came to you for help. The help with the bill was a great relief to me

4. Helping Hand

- 4.1 The Helping Hand team has continued to lead and coordinate use of these funds across Buckinghamshire for the Council, including the delivery of an application-based service for residents who need to support, in line with the requirements set out by Government.
- 4.2 The Helping Hand delivery model accepts direct applications from residents, ensuring that the right support can be provided quickly to those who are in most need.

4.3 This team works collaboratively with internal Council departments to develop our offer, identify residents who are in need of support and engage with these residents to ensure they receive the support they need.

4.4 Helping Hand have also developed and maintained excellent relationships with partners, local groups and across the voluntary and community sector to identify need, support the development of provision and to raise awareness of services and support that is available to residents. We actively work with community groups to develop bespoke provision that is relevant to, and accessible by, residents in these areas who may be less likely to reach out for support.

4.5 This approach has also resulted in better insight and intelligence to enable better understanding of our residents and communities, which can then be used to inform activity and interventions delivered by the Council, by the voluntary and community sector, and by our strategic partners including housing associations and the Department for Work and Pensions.

4.6 The number of direct applications received by the Helping Hand team since 1st April 2023 and the number of services provided is detailed in the tables below:

Table 1: 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024	
Total direct applications:	9,851
Total services delivered:	12,104
Unique people receiving services:	4,186

4.7 Table 2 shows a breakdown of the type of services being delivered following direct application into the Helping Hand team:

Table 2: 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024		
Service	Quantity	%
Referrals	1,566	12.94%
White Goods	1,394	11.52%
Wider Essential Goods	677	5.59%
Food & Fuel	7,802	64.46%
Grants	665	5.49%
Total	12,104	100%

5. Household Support Fund 5 – April to September 2024

5.1 In the Government’s Spring Statement, it was confirmed that the Department for Work and Pensions’ Household Support Fund is being extended from April to September 2024.

In line with previous allocations, Buckinghamshire has been allocated £2.4m for this period.

- 5.2 The fifth tranche of the Household Support Fund is intended to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with the cost of essential items.
- 5.3 Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out by the Department for Work and Pensions. The fund must be used to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials; and Local Authorities should prioritise support which offers an immediate impact to those in need.
- 5.4 Local Authorities can also use funding to support households with housing costs where existing housing support does not meet this need, and to supplement support with signposting and advice.
- 5.5 Authorities must operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to crisis support throughout the duration of the fund, either continuously over the majority of the fund period or in regular intervals throughout the scheme.
- 5.6 Individual awards can be whatever type and amount is deemed appropriate by Local Authorities for the receiving household.
- 5.7 Whilst immediate needs should be prioritised, Local Authorities are encouraged to use the fund to provide support that has a long-term sustainable impact, for example household items which would reduce bills in the long-term.
- 5.8 The guidance states that Local Authorities should use their local insight and intelligence to determine the beneficiaries of the fund. Local Authorities have the flexibility within the fund to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility.
- 5.9 There is a requirement to provide quarterly returns during the Household Support Fund 5 grant period with the final return to cover the whole period due by 25 October 2024.
- 5.10 Within the parameters set out in 5.3, the fund can be used to cover:
 - 5.10.1 Energy bills relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills.
 - 5.10.2 Support with food costs either through vouchers, cash or in kind.
 - 5.10.3 Other household essentials linked to energy, food and water. For example, the fund can be used to cover insulation costs, provide white goods or slow cookers; which would help to develop sustainable solutions through the reduction in energy costs.
 - 5.10.4 Wider essentials – including broadband, phone and clothing costs, or support with sanitary and hygiene products.

- 5.10.5 To provide supplementary advice services to award recipients, including debt and benefit advice, where Authorities consider this appropriate however it is clearly stated that this Fund is to provide crisis support for households, and that any advice services would be to complement this practical support.
- 5.10.6 Housing costs can be covered in exceptional circumstances and where existing housing schemes do not meet this exceptional need. For example, the fund can exceptionally and in genuine emergency be used to provide support for historic rent arrears built up prior to an existing benefit claim for households already in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit; however these should not be the primary focus of the fund. Mortgage costs cannot be supported through the fund.
- 5.10.7 The fund can also be used to cover reasonable administration costs, including staff costs, web page design, IT system costs and promotional activity and content to raise the profile of the scheme. Administration costs for each Local Authority will be published on www.gov.uk along with details of how the fund has been spent within each area.

Case Study 3

- Married couple with three young children. Wife works full-time, husband has been made redundant and applying for multiple jobs
- Husband is struggling with his mental health
- Requested support with food

Outcomes:

- Foodbank referral made
- Supermarket vouchers issued
- Signposted to his GP and Healthy Minds
- Referral made to The Getaway Foundation for a well needed holiday for the family
- Christmas hamper and presents provided

Can I say a massive thank you please. Once again you have gone above and beyond. I had literally just told the girls we couldn't afford a proper Christmas dinner this year and then you called with that news! You will never know how grateful I am and they had such an amazing day! The food, the chocolate, all the toys - I was in literal tears at your generosity.

6. Proposed allocation of the Household Support Fund April to September 2024

- 6.1 Local Authorities are required to complete a delivery plan to outline their intentions for The Fund, clearly setting out their priorities and approach for use of the Fund, and to demonstrate the ways in which they intend to allocate their funding. The delivery plan will be sent to the Department for Work and Pensions by 10 May 2024.
- 6.2 Table 3 sets out the proposed allocation of the £2.4m that Buckinghamshire will receive from the new Household Support Fund.
- 6.3 These proposals are in line with Government guidance and are modelled around local

understanding of need across different categories, informed by local intelligence and previous delivery of support through the Helping Hand service.

6.4 Funding will only be used for schemes that are free to residents.

6.5 In addition to the allocations listed in Table 3, approximately £167,943 will be used to cover overhead costs in line with the government guidance.

6.6 Residents may be eligible for support across multiple categories listed in Table 3, and may be eligible to receive support on multiple occasions during the period.

Table 3: Proposed Allocation of Household Support Fund April 2024 – September 2024

Indicative Allocation	% of fund	Target group	Type of Support	Delivery mechanism
£230,000	10%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Application-based service through the Helping Hand team
£955,500	40%	Children/young people: Free School Meals / Early Years Support / Schools / Colleges inc. Afghan/Ukraine refugees	Food Support	Digital food voucher during school holiday periods - May half-term - £15 Summer Holiday - £50 for full holiday
£200,000	8%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Voluntary and Community organisations providing free support to residents, including Foodbanks
£250,000	10%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Grant and/or Direct Support for Utility arrears through different schemes including Helping Hand Fund administered by Heart of Bucks.
£595,747	25%	Targeted support for priority cohorts, including those in Opportunity Bucks wards	All types of support	Digital Voucher or other appropriate support; expected to include approximately £200k to support Discretionary Housing Payments following reduction in funding from Department for Work & Pensions
£167,943	7%	Covering all target groups	Other costs	Administration costs, including staff costs, web page design, IT system costs and promotional activity and content to raise the profile of the scheme
£2,399,190	100%	Total grant funding allocation for Buckinghamshire		

Please note that allocations above are indicative. Actual spend will vary in line with resident need and emerging pressures during the period covered by the fund.

7. Summary

- 7.1 Buckinghamshire Council is committed to ensuring that vulnerable residents who are most in need receive support via our Helping Hand service.
- 7.2 The support and intervention we have provided has benefitted many thousands of residents across the County and ensured that families and vulnerable people have had access to food, water, clothing, warmth and other essential items; and we have established a strong partnership across the county to ensure support is getting to people who need it most.
- 7.3 The proposals detailed in this paper aim to ensure that the new allocation of the Household Support Fund is utilised in a targeted and effective manner between now and the end of September, to reduce the impact of cost of living pressures for Buckinghamshire residents.

8. Legal and financial implications

- 8.1 The Secretary of State determines the authorities to which grant is to be paid and the amount of grant to be paid.
- 8.2 The Household Support Fund Grant indicative funding allocation for Buckinghamshire Council for the period 1st April 2024 to 30th September 2024 is £2,399,190. Pursuant to section 31(3) and 31(4) of the Local Government Act 2003, the Secretary of State determines that the grant will be paid in respect of this period.
- 8.3 The grant is paid to the Authority to support eligible expenditure only, in line with guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions; and on the basis overall that the provision of grant funding remains subject to the Secretary of State's ongoing satisfaction that all grant usage by the Authority complies fully with the relevant conditions.
- 8.4 Funding is paid in arrears and following completion of a data return to the Department for Work and Pensions. The amount of grant funding Buckinghamshire receives from the allocation listed in 8.2 will be in line with the evidence provided in the data return. This approach is in line with previous grants and the Helping Hand, Business Intelligence and Finance teams will work together to complete the required returns.
- 8.5 County Councils and Unitary Authorities have a statutory duty regarding children and are generally responsible for Local Welfare Assistance. The Department for Work and Pensions is providing funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the scheme and provide assistance to households most in need.

8.6 Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in guidance documentation provided by the Department for Work and Pensions. The expectation is that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need particularly those including children and pensioners who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food, water bills, other essential household costs and housing costs in exceptional circumstances.

8.7 An initial Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and identified no negative impact from the proposals in this report.

9. Director of Legal & Democratic Services Comment

9.1 The Director of Legal & Democratic Service has read and noted this report.

10. Section 151 Officer Comment

10.1 The Section 151 Officer has read and noted this report.

11. Corporate Implications

11.1 The provision of support to residents who are experiencing financial insecurity is aligned with the Corporate Plan priority to protect the vulnerable.

12. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

12.1 Not applicable – Portfolio Holder consulted.

13. Communication, engagement & further consultation

13.1 Following this decision, a communications plan will be developed to continue to promote the Helping Hand service and raise awareness of support available to residents who are most in need.

14. Next steps and review

14.1 Following this decision, the Helping Hand service will coordinate use of the Household Support Fund in line with the allocations set out in Table 4.

15. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

15.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk by 2 May 2024.